

RUBY BRIDGES

The first black child to desegregate an elementary school in the South celebrates an anniversary

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**RUBY
BRIDGES**

ERIC JULIEN

The painting is both subtle and powerful. In it, a small, solemn black girl in a starched white dress is surrounded by men, whose faces you don't see, walking with tightly clenched fists. On closer inspection, they're wearing armbands that say "Deputy U.S. Marshal" and scrawled in crude lettering above the girl's head is the word "nigger." The air of menace and innocence is palatable – the calm of the child belies the turmoil

around her that you don't see – the crowd of white protesters shouting epitaphs and threats, throwing objects. The painting, "The Problem We All Live With," by Norman Rockwell, is an iconic vision of both America and the Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century. Its message is still as direct today as it was then.

While the painting was completed in 1964, inspired by Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Steinbeck's comments about the event in *Travels with Charley*, the event itself occurred 50 years ago on Nov. 14, 1960. The child in the painting, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, was going to her first day of first-grade at the William Frantz School in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan.*, stating segregation unconstitutional, Frantz was an all-white school – white teachers, white students. Bridges became the first black child to desegregate an elementary school in the South. (That same day, three other students integrated the McDonogh 19 Elementary School.) These two schools had been chosen for desegregation, with the federal court deadline of September 1950.

For Bridges, the groundwork had been laid back in kindergarten at Johnson Lockett Elementary School, the black school she attended that was farther away from her home than Frantz. The parish school board had started testing black children to see who could be sent to white schools. That spring of 1950, members of the NAACP came to her parents, Lucille and Abon Bridges, and told them she was one of the few to pass the test and she had been chosen to attend the Frantz School. While Bridges' mother believed this was an

important thing for her to do, her father had reservations, fearful of his daughter's safety.

Escorted by U.S. Marshals past an angry mob of white protesters, Bridges entered the Frantz school, and spent her first day in the principal's office with her mother while parents of Frantz students pulled their children out of school. The next day, the crowd had grown and had become more aggressive. "I tried not to pay attention," says Bridges in her book, *Through My Eyes*, about the protesters. However, she couldn't miss the sight of a black doll in a coffin, which scared her, and a woman who threatened to poison her. This was, remember, only her second day of school. (As a result of the poisoning threat, it was decided that Bridges could only eat food that was prepared at home.) Throughout New Orleans, that first week of desegregation was met with riots, vandalism and fights between whites and blacks. Teachers at her school quit, and Bridges reminds me that "This wasn't just about children. It was also about integrating teachers and the school board, who were white."

Bridges was the sole student in her class, taught by a white teacher, Mrs. Barbara Henry, originally from Boston, whose husband was stationed at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss. (Bridges is still in contact with Mrs. Henry.) Slowly, some white parents enrolled their children in the school, despite being harassed by protestors, so by December, there were 18 students. Yet, Bridges was still segregated from those children. "The principal, who was against desegregation, hid the children from me," says Bridges.

As the school year progressed, Bridges started slowly having some interaction with the white students, but it was through this, and by hearing comments by the protestors, that she finally became aware of racism. As she recounts in her book, "'I can't play with you,' the boy said. 'My mama said not to because you're a nigger.' At that moment, it all made sense to me. I finally realized that everything had happened because I was black."

At the beginning of her second year of elementary school, "It was like the first year didn't happen." The protestors were gone, the classes integrated.

It was the realization she had as a little girl – children aren't born racist, but are taught it – that was among the factors years later would influence Bridges' decision to jump into the

Civil Rights struggles of the late 20th and early 21st century. Her Ruby Bridges Foundation was started to “promote the values of tolerance, respect and appreciation through educational programs,” says the foundation’s website. One of her programs, Ruby’s Bridges, connects children of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds through service projects, such as planting trees, in hopes it will transcend their differences.

Bridges also has big plans for the Frantz School, which she wants to have restored (it was damaged in Hurricane Katrina) and become a charter school with a Civil Rights Museum as part of it. She hopes to open it in 2012.

When you hear Bridges talk about it, you believe she can do it, because the same focus and determination she had as a child, as well as her strong faith and sense of humor, is willing it to happen.

There will be several activities commemorating the 50th anniversary of the day Bridges integrated the Frantz School; please visit the Ruby Bridges Foundation website:
www.rubybridges.com.

Age: 56 **Born:** Tylertown, Miss.; **Grew up:** New Orleans **Resides:** Gretna, La. **Family:** I am the oldest of eight children – four girls, four boys. My parents were Lucille and Abon. I have four sons, one of whom is now deceased. **Education:** Graduated from Francis T. Nicholls High School, New Orleans **Favorite book:** Why New Orleans Matters by Tom Piazza **Favorite movie:** Meet Joe Black – I like it for a lot of reasons. It is dark and romantic. And I love Brad Pitt ... and Anthony Hopkins. **Favorite TV show:** I’m not a TV person. But I do like old movies, shows on Nick at Nite. **Favorite food:** I have a sweet tooth – it’s my weakness. I love bread pudding, banana pudding, sweet potato pies. But I also like gumbo. **Favorite restaurant:** I could eat at Zea’s every day. Parkway Bakery, MiLa, La Thai, Port of Call and Dooky Chase – Leah Chase cooks just like my mom. **Favorite music/musicians:** Maze, Luther Vandross, Marvin Gaye **Favorite vacation spot:** I don’t know! I love Hawaii and Singapore – though both are very different. I would like to go to Italy and Greece. **Hobby:** Gardening ... I love trees. When I was little, we used to go to my grandmother’s farm and she could grow anything she touched. I think I got my love for it from her.

What was the evolution of your return to Civil Rights and starting your Ruby Bridges

Foundation? After high school and taking some business courses, I became a travel agent because I thought it was a way out of New Orleans and would open doors. I was with American Express for 15 years, and I loved my job because it gave me the opportunity to travel abroad. But I wanted to do something meaningful, and traveling didn't seem like that. I just wasn't doing something that made a difference, and I all of a sudden found myself very depressed, trying to figure out what my purpose was. Then, I lost my youngest brother in 1990 – he was killed in a housing project. It was a wake-up call.

What was your first step? The first step really was when I lost my brother, I took in his four daughters, who were living in the housing project. I had to bring them to school every day, and the school they were attending was the Frantz School. I didn't know it, but that was my first step. I wasn't working; the principal knew who I was and said, "It was about time that someone took an interest. What are you doing? We can use all the help we can get." And I thought, why not? I felt a special kinship with the school. The next thing that happened was Dr. Coles wrote *The Story of Ruby Bridges* in 1995, and it was the first book of its kind to explain what happened to me as a 5 or 6-year-old child. Scholastic [the publisher] asked me to promote it; then I got media attention. From there it took off. Disney saw the book, and the movie about my experience was made.

Tell me about your plans for the William Frantz School. When I was traveling around the U.S., I saw the difference in schools – I couldn't believe the difference between public and private schools. [In private], 10 kids in a class, all have laptops. The difference was mind-boggling. And I thought to myself, these kids sitting back in New Orleans, in the school I integrated, have no clue about what they're missing. How do you compete with that? So then my focus changed to the school and how I could make it better. I had an opportunity to visit Little Rock, and Central High School (the first school to be forcefully integrated in the Civil Rights era), and saw that they raised \$23 million by putting it on the National Registry. There is a visitor's center there and it gave me the idea that if they can do that there, I can do that in New Orleans. The first step was to declare the school a historical site. So that meant selling people on a part of history that we haven't embraced. Even now it's an uphill battle. Because what I really want to do is to apply for my own [school] charter. The foundation managed to put it on the National Registry of Historic Places in 2005. Then Hurricane Katrina hit. Now, FEMA has set aside \$25 to \$30 million dollars to fix the school

up. I want it to be the Ruby Bridges School of Community Service and Social Justice. And the reason why is that I believe that we need to teach kids early on about community service. It's something that children don't get. It's a value they are missing. They need to understand it's not "Me, Me, Me." And I want it to specialize in history. Because the truth is, history isn't being taught properly – not just my story, but other stories about Civil Rights. So, maybe history should be taught how it happens, and you and I would see each other in a different light?

I think that's how we do something about racism, it's more preventive than waiting for it to happen.

Did you think your lifetime that there would be a black president? I will tell you a story about my grandson. He was very young, a straight-A student, and I told him he could be anything he wanted to be. I said, as matter of fact, you are going to be the first black president. And he got a huge smile on his face. How it [initially] came up is when he asked me, "Do you have to be white to be president?" because they are all white in the book he was reading. And I said no, they're all waiting on you. You can be anything you want to be. He took that to heart, and he told everyone he was going to be the first black president. So when Barack started running and he won, [my grandson] came to me and said, "He stole my dream." I said, "He didn't steal your dream, you can still be president."

I was very hopeful to have a black president, but honestly didn't think it was going to happen.

True Confession: I have an incredible sense of humor. I could have been a comedian.

